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WASHINGTON

Reagan on Subversion

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, Oct. 22 — In his most recent news conference — his first in three months — President Reagan defended his resorting to subversive warfare in Central America, and the necessity of keeping such covert military actions secret.

"I do believe," he said, "in the right of a country, when it believes that its interests are best served, to practice covert activity..."

Mr. Reagan has a way of saying what he truly believes in news conferences, which may be why he has so few of them. For when he asserts that he believes in the right of a country to engage in subversive warfare when it thinks its national interests are "best served," there is a problem.

This is precisely what the Russians believe. They believe that their national interests are "best served" by practicing "covert activity" in Central America, Angola, Syria, the Horn of Africa, Europe, Southeast Asia and many other places, including the U.S.

It is also precisely what President Reagan has been condemning them for doing, which puts him in the awkward position of claiming the "right" to do what he denies to his adversaries.

The odd thing about this is that Leonid M. Zamyatin, who runs Moscow's lie factory, will be delighted, for dictatorships are much better at subversive warfare than are democracies.

They live by secrecy. They control all communications. Pravda and Izvestia never question their masters, even when they shoot down civilian airplanes.

Yuri Andropov, unlike Mr. Reagan, has no Congress or Tip O'Neill to cut off funds, say, to Castro in Cuba or Soviet troops in Afghanistan, or to ask why he's spending so many rubles on missiles when hungry people have no food to eat. Subversion is an unequal game.

Obviously, the United States has to play it from time to time, and as the President pointed out the other night, it has been doing so ever since the beginning of the Republic.

For example, General Washington subverted the German Hessians who were fighting with the British during our War of Independence by offering them land and freedom in Virginia if they would throw away their guns.

He set them up in Fauquier County, where they lived for generations with their own laws, churches and taxes in what was called the Free State of Virginia.

I know a little about this because my wife and I have had a log cabin in the Free State for 40 years. Though the Hessians are now gone, the stock having run out through intermarriage, this first experiment in subversive warfare paid off fairly well.

Yet, it's not at all clear in this different day and age that democracies, and especially America, can or should try to compete with the Russians on the low level of subversive warfare.

We have our C.I.A. spooks all over Central America, our warships off the coast of Nicaragua. We are not trying to overthrow the governments the Reagan Administration says it doesn't like there, but everybody knows that is precisely what we are trying to do by subversive warfare.

This is why the House of Representatives here has voted to cut off funds for the Nicaraguan rebels. There is a revolt in the House against the Reagan Administration's subversive warfare in Central America, for a majority of the House, right or wrong, simply doesn't believe this C.I.A. subversive operation is right or is working.

In back of this vote against the Administration is clearly a feeling that the Administration is not telling the truth, and is engaged in an operation that is violating the treaty commitments of the United States not to use

or threaten force to achieve its political objectives.

In short, the House rejects the President's principle that it is "the right of a country, when it believes that its interests are best served, to practice covert activity..."

What if everybody acted on this idea? Why should the United States support this vicious notion, so central to Soviet policy? And why did President Reagan defend the right of nations to do anything they pleased if their own interests were at stake?

The answer around here is that he didn't mean that his principle should be applied to the Russians but only to ourselves, and otherwise, he didn't think about it at all.

That's the way it is with the President. He wants to get government off our backs, but intends to shove a gag law down the throats of Government employees.

He says he'll agree to a Martin Luther King Day, but when he's asked whether Dr. King was a Communist sympathizer, says, "We'll know in about 35 years, won't we?"

Every day is a new performance. Every statement stands alone. There are no connecting rods between one light-hearted pronouncement and the other. This is why his staff recommends that he stay out of news conferences as much as possible.